

## Remembering Ved Prakash Beri : an artist who created one of the early science museums in India

*V N Dhaulakhandi and Jayanta Sthanapati*

*"Shri V P Beri touched nothing which he did not adorn" – Ramanathbhan Subramanian*

*"The greatest contribution of Shri V P Beri was introduction of artistic elements in exhibits of science museums through well-designed visual support and dioramas" – Saroj Ghose*



*Shri V P Beri at his residence in New Delhi in 2012.*

Museums in India have existed in one form or other for almost two hundred years. The Indian Museum in Calcutta was opened in 1814. Other museums of traditional nature, established during the 19th Century British India, were Government Museum, Madras; Government Museum, Trivandrum; Central Museum, Nagpur; and the State Museum, Lucknow. A dedicated Museum of Industry, the Lord Reay Industrial Museum, which was primarily a display of collections, was established in Pune in 1875. The Indian Museum too had some collection of natural objects. However no modern science museum fully dedicated for display of science and technology exhibits was established in British India.

The Science Museum, London was established in 1857 and after two decades the Natural History Museum, also in London was opened in 1881. World's largest

museum of technology and science, the Deutsches Museum in Munich was inaugurated in 1903. In the United States, the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. was opened in 1910. The Air and Space Museum, another important museum under the Smithsonian Institution, and most visited (about 9 million every year) in the world, was opened in 1946. The Japanese National Museum of Nature and Science, set up in Tokyo in 1871, was the first dedicated museum of science and natural history in Asia. India was the second Asian country to have a science museum, but only after her independence.

In early years of 1950s four towering personalities took keen interest in establishing Science Museums in the country. They were Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, First Prime Minister of India, Syt. Ghanshyam Das Birla, an eminent industrialist, Prof. K. S. Krishnan, a distinguished physicist and Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, a renowned physician and the then Chief Minister of West Bengal. With their unconditional support and due to dedicated work of three young enthusiasts, namely, Shri Ved Prakash Beri, Shri Ramanathan Subramanian and Shri Amalendu Bose, three science museums came up in the country. In 1954, Birla Museum was set at Pilani, a small town in Rajasthan. The museum was reopened with more exhibits on science and technology in 1958. A Science Museum at National Physical Laboratory in New Delhi was set up in 1957. The Birla Industrial and Technological Museum was established in Calcutta in 1959.

The NPL Science Museum was, however, closed after demise of Prof. Krishnan in 1961. As a result Shri Subramanian had to move to Calcutta. There he established Birla Planetarium, the first Asian Planetarium in 1962, under guidance and financial support of Syt. M P Birla, another member of the Birla Family. Both Birla Museum at Pilani and Birla Industrial and Technological Museum in Kolkata have been playing great roles in enhancing public understanding of science since their inception. The Birla Planetarium, Kolkata will celebrate its Golden Jubilee on 2 July, 2013.



Name and location of the Science Museums	Year of establishment	Young leaders who developed the science museums and their background	Towering personalities who encouraged the team leaders and supported the projects
Birla Museum, Pilani	1954 (expanded in 1958)	Shri Ved Prakash Beri (Art & Sculpture)	Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Syt. Ghanshyam Das Birla Syt. Lakshmi Niwas Birla
Science Museum, NPL, New Delhi	1957	Shri Ramnathan Subramanian (Physical Science)	Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Prof. K.S. Krishnan
Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, Calcutta	1959	Shri Amalendu Bose (Chemistry)	Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy Syt. Ghanshyam Das Birla

*Modern Science Museums established in India during 1950s.*

From early 1950s industrialist Syt. Ghanshyam Das Birla (1894 -1983) was toying with an idea to develop a science and technology museum in the country. He had strong base in Calcutta, Delhi and also at Pilani. The process of making Pilani ultimately a town of educational institutions began as early as in 1901 with the establishment of a primary school by his grandfather Seth Shiv Narayan Birla (1838-1910). An intermediate collage was established there by Shri G D Birla in 1928 and the Birla Education Trust (BET) was formed, also at Pilani, under his chairmanship in 1929. Then came up, one after the other, a Girls School (1931), a Degree Collage (1943), a Montessori School (1944) and the Collage of Engineering (1946), all at Pilani, under the BET before independence. In early 1950s, a Collage of Arts (1951) and a Collage of Science (1952) were established. Subsequently, both science and engineering collages merged to become the Birla Institute of Technology and Science.

Shri G D Birla at that time engaged Dr. Charles Fabri, a famous art critic of Hungarian origin, to set up a museum at Pilani. As a result, a nucleus of a museum was formed with some specimens of natural history, and a few art objects like miniature paintings, sculptures etc.

In 1952, the trustees of the museum visited the Imperial Institute in London which displayed various exhibits in respect of activities of the British Empire in colonial countries including India. There they found six dioramas on tea garden, rubber plantation, cotton mill, rolling mill, sugar mill and surface colliery very

impressive. With a view to display similar exhibits in the Pilani Museum, they placed an order for duplication of the dioramas with a London based model maker M/s Rendal Page.

Unfortunately, the duplicated exhibits got damaged during transportation from London to Pilani. It transpired to the museum authorities that a huge sum would be needed to get those exhibits repaired by the British fabricators. They, therefore, requested Shri Dhanraj Bhagat, an eminent sculptor and professor of Delhi Polytechnic School of Arts (known as School of Planning and Architecture now) to arrange for repair of the dioramas at Pilani. Prof. Bhagat in turn advised Ved Prakash Beri, a young artist of his collage to accept the challenge.

Shri V P Beri was born on 8 August 1931 at Sialkot in undivided India, which now is under the Punjab province in Pakistan. He completed his collage studies in Delhi. After graduating in science from Hindu Collage, he received a diploma in fine arts, in the field of sculpture, from Delhi Polytechnic School of Arts. In 1955 he began his career in Pilani Museum, as an assistant to Charles Fabri. However, Fabri who was basically stationed in New Delhi, discontinued his association with the project soon. Shri Beri then approached Shri S D Pande, Secretary of the Birla Education Trust and expressed his desire to shoulder the primarily responsibility to give the museum an acceptable shape as was envisioned by Syt. G D Birla. Pandeji valued his promise and discussed the matter with Shri Birla. As a result, Shri Beri was appointed as a



Curator of the budding museum and sent to Europe for a nine month study tour of world famous science museums including Science Museum in London and Deutsches Museum in Munich. The museum project thereafter was monitored by Syt. Lakshmi Niwas Birla, the eldest son of Shri G D Birla.

On his return from abroad in 1956, Shri Beri was fully enlightened and seriously focused on the Birla Museum project. He decided to fabricate all the exhibits of the museum in house and engaged about a hundred local artisans as technicians. He was supported by a group of able supervisors. He deployed Shri N G Singh for fabrication of mechanical parts and Shri M P George for developing electrical circuits. Two imaginative artists Shri G D Ganu and Shri R B Kazi, were in his exhibit development team. He was further assisted by a highly skilled carpenter Shri Ramji Lal.



*Shri V P Beri accompanied Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Smt. Indira Gandhi inside a gallery of Birla Museum (1961).*

A fairly large workshop was set up and exhibits, such as, dioramas, panoramas and models were created to matchless perfection. The working models could be operated with just the flick of a hand and a touch of a few buttons. The exhibits covered subject areas like agriculture, irrigation, metallurgy, nuclear science and coal mine; and were also on manufacturing plants or industries like automobile, oil, rubber, tea, sugar, salt, marble etc.

Smt. Rama Beri recently recollected, "Back in those days, resources were limited but despite that, exuberant models were created by the local artisans. These people

had never ever stepped out of their small villages due to lack of transport but they created a model on 'growth of transport system of the world'...wheels, cars, rails, ships and the latest model of airplanes with the minutest of details. For example, a Luxury Ship model had a swimming pool on the deck with human figures sitting on reclining chairs with umbrellas!"

As the museum was growing day by day a need was felt to house it in its own building of specific design to match its requirements. The majestic Birla Museum building, as we see now, was designed by renowned architect M/s Stien and Polk of Calcutta and its construction was completed in 1964, in the premises of Vidya Vihar, the celebrated Educational complex of Pilani. Large number of new exhibits along with the old ones were installed in this building. A number of Artists, Interior decorators and Horticulturists were engaged to make the inner and outer environment of the building graceful. To add to the beauty of the Birla Museum, a sculpture called the 'Cosmic Man' was installed at the entrance to welcome everyone. It was developed by a California based sculptor Shri Kewal Soni, who followed a design conceived by Shri Beri.

Shri Lakshmi Niwas Birla donated his personal collection of the most expensive master paintings and artifacts. An Art Gallery was specially designed on the first floor of the building to accommodate this collection. Science and technology exhibits of the museum were on metallurgy, transport, space, chemistry, textiles, agriculture, mining, arms, irrigation, nuclear science and so on.

Besides being a very creative artist, Shri Beri was an excellent administrator. The Birla Museum reflects his energy - well maintained and organized, and it looks like a place of worship rather than a place of Industry and Technology. He left no stone unturned to maintain these high standards. Only the best always...no compromises! He was a man of few words, he dealt with his office staff in an extremely unique way, with different coloured stationery for different people...the colour of the paper would represent the concerned person! His office colleagues respected and loved him fondly despite his strict nature.

Since 1957, Shri Beri, Shri Bose and Shri Subramanian had maintained close professional contacts with each





*The present building of Birla Museum.*



*'Cosmic Man'-a sculpture on the foreground of Birla Museum.*



*Indoor water-body exhibit of Birla Museum.*



*Diorama of a Blast Furnace.*



*V P Beri and Jayanta Sthanapati during an interview of the former in New Delhi (2003).*

other, although their planning strategies of science museum exhibits differed greatly.

Prof. Ramanathan Subramanian during a conversation with one of us had praised Shri V P Beri with following words -- "I have known Mr. V P Beri right from the inception of his career in the mid-fifties in the domain of museology. Sitting at the hub of activities of the Birlas, he had set up not only a Haveli Museum (Family Museum), but was also instrumental in visualizing a Central Museum covering the areas of physical science and engineering. Mr. Beri as a man of art was very aesthetic in many things that he did or planned. He was also a person of great human qualities and discussed about exhibits, dioramas without mincing words. He would appreciate without any reservation good presentation and works. There is a saying "Nihil quod



tetigit non ornavit” (He touched nothing without embellishing it). Truly, this applies to Mr. V P Beri. His office, his instruments and the exhibits were all spic and span all the time. The Museum World will very much miss this personality.”

While answering to a question on the unique or greatest contribution of Shri V P Beri in science museum activities, Dr. Saroj Ghose, former Director General of National Council of science Museums wrote, “Exhibits in art and archaeology museums are intrinsically artistic in nature. In contrast, science museum exhibits, mostly machines and equipment, did not have attractive look as Victor Danilov, the long time Director of Chicago Museum of Science & Industry termed it as 'ugly duckling'. In my opinion the greatest contribution of V P Beri was introduction of artistic elements in otherwise ugly exhibits of science museums through well-designed visual support and dioramas. If not for anything else, Shri Beri will ever be remembered for outstanding dioramas creating 3D perspective even in small restricted space, with simple ingenious animations. ... Both BITM and VITM were initially developed with so-called sobre approach in display, but at a much later stage, new generation of exhibition officers in NCSM came up with brilliant colourful artistic displays based on their own imagination. In my opinion, Shri Beri's concept of display was ultimately vindicated in the science museums of India.”

In 1996, Shri Beri retired from Birla Museum and became Director of K K Birla Academy of Scientific, Historical and Cultural Research in New Delhi. Dr. V N Dhaulakhandi took over charge of this great science museum from him. Dr. Dhaulakhandi had started his career in Birla Museum as an Education Officer in 1982. He narrates an interesting incidence about his selection by Sri Beri, “I met him for the first time in Decemebr 1981 when I was called for interview. This interview was quite interesting as I was called for 5 days. On first four days I was asked to observe the working of Workshop Division, Upkeep Division, Maintenance Division and Establishment Division. On fifth day Mr. V P Beri called me in his chamber, and the only question he asked was 'When can you join?' I was speechless as I had entered in the office for a formal interview. Later I realized that during first four days he



*K K Birla while discussing an issue with V P Beri and V N Dhaulakhandi (2008).*

observed me in various departments, he found that I may be suitable for the Museum and therefore offered me the job. I joined the Museum in April, 1982.”

In 1960, Shri V P Beri married Smt Rama Beri, who came from a bureaucrat background and had earned BA and BEd degrees from Delhi University. Their three daughters and one son are all well educated and well placed. In Mrs. Beri's words, “Shri Beri was a soft spoken and very kind hearted gentleman. His firm square jaw line not only made him handsome but also a man of determination and confidence. The most loving father and a great husband who was adored by all...Mr.Beri! Last but not the least, adding the most important feather in the cap, if one goes through his 50 year old papers and files (income tax documents, medical bills, job offer letter etc) even today, one will see them compiled meticulously, and neatly labeled with details...that's Mr. Beri for you. Full of precision, perfection, concern, love and affection for every little thing he did and for every person he cared for...his family, friends and colleagues. His friends called him a Cute Curator...as in Cute Creator.. like Lord Vishnu.”

Shri Ved Prakash Beri passed away peacefully at his home in New Delhi in the wee hours on 9 December 2012. The science museum fraternities will always remember him.

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**Dr. V N Dhaulakhandi**, Director, Birla Museum, Pilani - 333031.  
vndpilani@yahoo.co.in



**Dr. Jayanta Sthanapati**, Former Deputy Director General, National Council of Science Museums.  
dr.jayanta.sthanapati@gmail.com